Stacy M. Kitsis

The Facebook Generation: Homework as Social Networking

Rather than fighting Internet blogs as a distraction from homework, this high school English teacher uses students' zeal for online discussion by creating engaging electronic homework assignments.

Learning in a Vacuum

Overburdened with athletics, play rehearsals, band practice, volunteer work, after-school jobs, friendships, and—if their parents are lucky—quality time with their families, it's hardly surprising that even the most dedicated students resent homework as an incursion on their time. Meanwhile, their teachers watch the growing stacks of unread paper with equal dread. I find myself in a spiral of shame: Collecting work at a pace that feels ideal for learning, I lose sleep in a losing race to get everything returned. So I stop picking it up and watch eyes roll and effort shrink with each perfunctory mark in my grade book: Spot checks reveal an alarming lack of engagement. The amount of copying goes up. Still, homework fulfills a necessary purpose when students need to practice skills or work through ideas outside of school (more vital than ever with rising class sizes limiting "face time"). Given the amount of curriculum I am expected to cover in a year and the precious few hours to do it, homework extends my class time in a way that I and—though they might disagree—my students can't afford to sacrifice.

Mikhail Bakhtin's principle of dialogism suggests that new meaning can only be generated when two bodies occupy different spaces at the same time (Holquist 21). Bakhtin writes, "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 60). In other words, knowledge is constructed in the exchange of voices, not in the voices themselves but the space *between* them. Learning grows from dialogue; it can't happen in a vacuum. And yet many students feel this is just what homework asks of them: to learn in isolation. Homework is too often completed alone, late at night, not discussed in class or meaningfully commented on by the instructor (just one person, after all, facing classes of twenty, thirty, or more).

I couldn't shake the feeling that, in my classroom, homework was broken. And it wasn't clear that, even with unlimited time and energy, I could ever provide the impetus to bring students from a state of grudging grade earning to one of earnest application. All my best intentions could not will them to learn. I had to put the onus back on the students.

Through trial and error I have found a fairly simple solution: rethinking the ideal audience for student homework. By shifting the onus of feedback from ourselves to others, particularly other learners, English teachers can create classrooms in which students care more about their work, and teachers can reclaim some time for other uses.

The Need for Feedback

My students needed to care more about their homework. I wasn't as concerned about the grammar, vocabulary, or assigned reading, which we all seemed to accept as par for the course. But their pride of ownership in real, substantial homework—the kind of critical thinking and writing at the heart of this discipline—was a different story. I knew they needed a safe place to practice skills without being "assessed to death," where even the most grade-conscious students could be convinced to take risks. But some degree of feedback was critical: Without the sense of writing for a real audience, many students shut down. An anonymous survey of my eleventh graders suggests that without timely feedback, effort is diminished and growth can stagnate:

> I do not try as hard on homework in classes where the teacher does not check, perhaps because there is no punishment but more likely because I do not attach value to an assignment if the teacher does not also attach value to that assignment.
>
> The homework that is the least helpful is when teachers assign "busy work" that never gets reflected on or read over by others. This can be annoying because if you put in a lot of effort into an assignment, and it does not get read over, then you do not always know where or how to improve.
>
> Once I had a teacher who seriously did not read my stuff and so sometimes I would put things in it to test my theory and when I found out that she really didn't read them I stopped working for her altogether.

It's not about *assessment*; as another student wrote, "Homework is supposed to be more of an opportunity for individual practice, not so much a chance to be graded." It's about bringing homework out of the vacuum and creating that space between the voices. They want to know how their ideas are perceived. After all, this is a generation of social networkers, the generation that turned *Facebook* and *MySpace* into verbs. The vast majority of my students instant message, blog, text, or Facebook daily. A scant few admit to keeping private journals. Like most teens, they are obsessed with what others, especially their peers, think of them. What's more, Bakhtin would agree: "For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others" (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 55). It's not important if they can't "fix" each other's work; correcting surface errors at this stage is not only unnecessary, it may be counterproductive. On the other hand, anyone can respond to *ideas*. And to most students, an audience of their peers is the most meaningful forum out there.

When it comes to audiences for student writing, we're often talking about the "finished" product: play reviews in the local paper or research presentations before a panel of community members. Less emphasis is placed on audiences for casual work, the kind of informal probing and testing of ideas where much of the best thinking occurs, and this is where social networking can pay off. We can solve the fundamental incompatibility of students' needs and our workload by shifting to them some of the responsibility for providing feedback, turning homework into dialogue. Peer learning has advantages for students inside and outside classrooms, improving academic skills and subject matter mastery through the "free exchange of ideas," while simultaneously teaching critical social and communication skills (De Lisi 5).

Learning grows from dialogue; it can't happen in a vacuum. And yet many students feel this is just what homework asks of them: to learn in isolation.

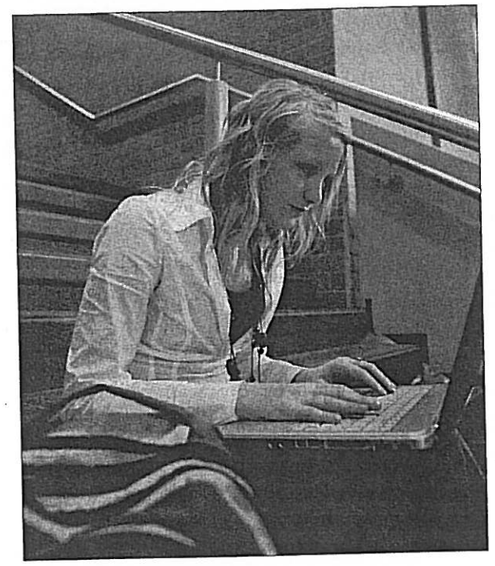
All it takes is a little restructuring.

Go Net, Young Man

Internet technologies offer great promise for extending the benefits of authentic dialogue to homework. Students appreciate the more social aspects of email and blogs:

> I like the blog posts because we get to interact with other students . . . when we are not able to during class.
>
> Conversing with someone [through email] made the book seem more practical and enjoyable, and less like a forced assignment.

A colleague and I began experimenting with email exchanges three years ago with *The Great Gatsby*. It's a simple setup: Each student is assigned a partner with whom they exchange a 200-word email for each reading assignment. The startup investment is minimal and prompts can be easily adapted from existing curriculum. (I use several from David Dowling's invaluable unit plan, part of the NCTE High School Literature Series, including diary entries from the perspective of Daisy and Gatsby.) As a class, we set clear expectations for each email: Every response must explicitly acknowledge the previous one, textual support is a must, and mechanics matter. Partners take turns writing first. Students carbon copy me electronically or print and bring their emails to class for credit, but after the



first or second exchange, the responsibility for providing direct feedback is turned over to them. The initial topics are scripted—a series of questions around Nick Carraway's reliability as narrator—but as they get more practice, I back off and offer more open-ended prompts.

In introducing the assignment, I make a big deal out of drawing the pairs at random from a hat, for dramatic flair and a sense of fairness. The rule "you can't work with the person you are sitting next to" ensures that partners broaden each other's horizons. Students have fun socializing at the beginning of their letters, wishing each other luck on upcoming soccer matches or math tests. Two former kindergarten playmates even rekindled an old friendship. Meanwhile, I bathe in pleasure and relief: When meaningful feedback is no longer my sole domain, the whole class shares interpretive authority. Bringing students together in unlikely ways also reinforces the courtesy and communication skills so crucial to the increasingly digital workplace, as this heartwarming final exchange suggests:

Students put in more effort knowing that their peers are reading their work and depending on them for help. The quality and consistency of homework was generally higher than assignments they knew I would collect and respond to, demonstrating the potential of dialogue to curb homework apathy.

> Well here it is, the final email! Thanks for working with me with all the work for this book. I appreciate it.
>
> It was great being partners with you too, Hussein, hopefully we'll be partners again sometime!

Students put in more effort knowing that their peers are reading their work and depending on them for help. The quality and consistency of homework was generally higher than assignments they knew I would collect and respond to, demonstrating the potential of dialogue to curb homework apathy. Opportunities for introspection were particularly revealing, as seen in response to the question "How can you connect *The Great Gatsby* to your own life?" One student told the story of using his association with a family member to avoid consequences after breaking a window at a local business:

> This reminds me of Gatsby because I was similar to Tom and Daisy, only instead of shattering others' lives, I shattered a window. In any other case, I would have had to pay for the window and formally apologize, but . . . I was connected to a valued customer at the bank. Just like Tom and Daisy I retreated into my grandmother's wealth and I never felt any repercussion.
>
> Hey, that's a really good example from your own life . . . we all have our moments when we can be selfish and I am sure that I have done this at some point in my life. Even if it means asking for a ride someplace when my parents would rather be relaxing . . .

When surveyed a few months later, students had positive memories of the experience. They enjoyed the chance to hear new perspectives, to rehearse their ideas before bringing them to the larger group, and to read deeply and actively with one other person:

> I liked that the writing assignments were creative and that I got discuss the book with one person first before presenting my ideas to the rest of the class. I feel that any homework that involves discussion with a group or partners is useful because new ideas that I might not have thought of myself are brought to my attention. It also makes the assignment more fun.
>
> It was more personal than some homework, a great way to get to know other classmates, and to be sure that your thoughts have full attention of the person.
>
> I thought it was really helpful and fun because I get to learn from my peers as well as know more about them . . . During a big discussion group, there's less of a chance to say something, especially right on the spot. When having email exchanges, we get to have the time to think about the discussion and the replies.
>
> We helped each other better understand gray areas or raise interesting questions. I also liked how it made us think about the book, especially on the occasions when we were tired and might have skimmed or misinterpreted a section.

The most common challenges are Internet access and scheduling conflicts with partners. I'm spoiled in that nearly 99% of students at my school report having computers, but that doesn't rule out unanticipated technical difficulties. Scheduling a few days between assignments and providing the topics in advance reduces stress: Students can use the school's media center before or after school, and with a little planning nobody has to wait up at night for emails (we leave a few minutes at the end of class once or twice for partners to touch base). Students saw how their reliance on each other cut both ways: "Schedules would conflict and if you had a lazy partner things wouldn't work out. But at the same time, the motivation was there . . . your partner was depending on you." Next year I intend to experiment with groups of three or four to avoid the situation created when one person becomes ill or otherwise delinquent.

Blogging All the Way

As many teachers have discovered, blogging is another great way to get students dialoging through homework. I post a question to which students have a few days to respond. As with the emails, their comments should include concrete support for their point of view, respond directly to at least one previous post, and be mechanically proficient (even more so, I remind them, as this is a public extension of our classroom). Replies are limited to 200 words or reading the thread becomes overwhelming. In terms of maintaining flow and sharing airtime, blogging reinforces the same skills as Socratic seminar and other classroom discussions. It also provides nearly immediate feedback on homework, as they see the reactions come in real time. Again, I provide individual commentary on the first several posts using a rubric until students have internalized expectations and I can become the invisible observer of their meaning making.

For privacy, students use first names only or pseudonyms that they share with me. (It's especially fun to pick out secret pen names to be revealed at the end of the unit.) With larger classes, I might post a few topics to choose between so that the discussion thread doesn't get too unwieldy. Students are obviously more responsive to each other when posts are staggered rather than being written simultaneously, which is why it's important to allow a sufficient window for responding. If students need a little encouragement, I assign alternating deadlines by last name, so that half the class posts at least 24 hours before the other.

The best topics stir up some controversy; as one of my students wrote, "If there was an actual debate raging online that would be pretty awesome." When studying *The Scarlet Letter,* for example, the question "Is public humiliation an effective form of punishment today?" might be more conducive to blogging than "How does Hawthorne use color imagery to create mood?" My AP Language and Composition students tackle the first prompt vigorously:

> Stephanie makes an excellent point when she says that, "sometimes it may be necessary to examine the person's situation and fix the root of the problem instead of breeding resentment." . . . No two crimes are the same, and, as Stephanie also points out, in some cases the culprit is not as guilty as it appears at first glance. As a result no two punishments should be the same. Everyone reaps the benefits when judges remove their blindfolds . . . even if it means straying beyond the normal limits of our legal system.

Another student ventured to disagree:

> Not to sound too contrary, but I'm going to go ahead and disagree with pretty much everyone . . . Though Stephanie and Galen make an interesting point about the uniqueness of every crime, personalized justice is impossible, because there is no way to ensure an objective, consistent assessment.

SAMPLE BLOG POST RUBRIC				
	4	3	2	1
Ideas and Topic Development	Communicates a sophisticated and original point of view, using strong support. Uses textual references as appropriate.	Communicates an original point of view, using adequate support.	Communicates a point of view, but may be vague or merely echo previous posts without contributing original ideas or support.	Fails to communicate a point of view on the topic.
Voice and Style	Effective word choice and varied sentence structure contribute to a clear and powerful voice.	Adequate word choice and sentence structure contribute to an appropriate and effective voice.	Word choice and sentence structure show little variety, undermining the sense of voice.	Inappropriate word choice or problems with sentence structure obscure meaning; voice may be overly informal.
Contribution to Learning Community	Meaningfully and respectfully references at least one colleague; attempts to motivate the group discussion with new and creative approaches.	Respectfully references at least one colleague; does not disrupt the flow of the group discussion.	Does not reference any specific colleagues; fails to acknowledge the ongoing discussion.	Makes limited effort to engage with the group; may post off topic.
Mechanics	There are few errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation; post is on time and does not exceed 200 words.	There are several errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	There are many errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	Extensive errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation obscure meaning; post may be late or fail to meet requirements for length.

> What some judges find less drastic, other judges may think is the sign of a hardened criminal, and such a situation could quickly lead to potential racism and prejudiced decisions far more easily than standard punishments for a given crime.

These self-proclaimed "Devil's advocates" immediately see the energy injected into the discussion as their classmates react to their counterargument.

Most importantly, homework is no longer happening in the vacuum. In fact, our audience is easily broadened beyond our classroom when we share the blog with parents and other community members—which usually results in some precious positive feedback for *me*, too. Obviously, security concerns must be explicitly addressed. Knowing that my students are already going online, whether I ask them to or not, I value the opportunity to teach them about Internet safety in a real-world context. Interactions should be monitored closely. That said, my students are typically more thoughtful and courteous online than they are in the heat of a class debate. In addition to safeguarding privacy, blogging with pen names helps more reserved students to shine, as described by Will Richardson in "Web Logs in the English Classroom: More Than Just Chat," and forces participants to align themselves with ideas rather than the people saying them (40). And in today's age of hurtful and dangerous electronic communication, I'm happy to know students have a safe and productive space to engage with their peers.

Creating Opportunities for Dialogic Homework

For the teacher willing to invest the time in new technologies, the Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for collective learning—opportunities

to make homework dialogic while redistributing the burden of feedback. This year one of my American literature classes received extensive feedback from me on traditional written homework in the fall, conducted an email exchange in the winter, and then started blogging with *Huckleberry Finn* in the spring. We didn't throw conventional homework out the window, but there was a clear shift. Students seemed to enjoy the variety as well as the increasingly broader audience for their writing. I'm in the process of setting up a wiki (available free to K–12 teachers at Wikispaces.com) to enable collaborative writing and revision outside the classroom without making unreasonable demands for face-to-face meeting time. As workplaces become increasingly global, the ability to work effectively with people in remote locations becomes more important.

There are few limits when it comes to creating opportunities for students to receive authentic feedback on homework. The audience need not be confined to the class, and the medium need not be electronic. Email exchanges and blogs could be set up with partner schools: with students in other geographic regions to expand their knowledge of the world, with younger students to experience a mentorship role, or with older students, such as the university partnership described in Carlin Borsheim's "Email Partnerships: Conversations That Changed the Way My Students Read." Parents, administrators, or other community members could also be invited to join in the conversation.

Similarly, peer feedback on homework can still be achieved through old-fashioned pen and paper. In the absence of email, a simple journal exchange can work wonders. If I'm too anxious about less organized classes losing each other's precious writing, the response to homework can happen in the first five minutes of class, perhaps in lieu of a freewriting activity. Students might be assigned to write a letter to an advice columnist ("Miss Ponder" for my school's *The Ponder Report*) from Holden Caulfield, using his voice. The next day, in class or for homework, students trade papers and write a reply; they love to see what advice Holden receives.

Students in AP Language and Composition at my school quickly learn to depend on each other with a series of "one-pagers" in the fall. Each overnight assignment employs a specific mode of development, under no circumstances to exceed one page. Students exchange essays and generate feedback guided by our course reader, *40 Model Essays* (Aaron). High-level questions lead them through the specific challenges of each mode. Students start to see what works without the need for high-stakes assessment. They try new things. They learn the difference between revising and editing. Feedback comes the next day, much more quickly than I could ever respond—and they gain even more by helping their partners, through criticism, comparison, and reflection.

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Learning to Give Feedback

Finally, students must be trained to provide this meaningful feedback, just as they need direct instruction and practice in having discussions or writing thesis statements. This is a critical investment and one that quickly pays for itself. While I initially feared students would be overly critical or hurtful over the distance of the Internet, more often the challenge has been just the opposite. Although it's wonderful to see students being kind and supportive, they occasionally need to be prodded to give more constructive, even pointed, feedback as well. They need to be real sounding boards, willing to disagree.

Spicy, debatable topics are crucial, as is explicit modeling so they know what helpful criticism looks like. I give periodic feedback on feedback to ensure that students invest an appropriate amount of time and energy into each others' learning (more often, however, I sit back and play the role of observer, monitoring, occasionally tweaking things here and there). It's important to know that feeling shortchanged in feedback from their peers may be even more hurtful than the teacher's hasty checkmark. One student reflected on her disappointment:

> I actually liked the idea of blogging more [than emailing] because everyone would be reading my thoughts and I'd get to see what everyone had to say but I felt like many times people's comments got skipped over by somebody wanting to respond to a previous comment and their thoughts were therefore unacknowledged.

This may be an opportunity for the teacher to step in with an observation of her own, perhaps pointing to the merit of the unacknowledged comment. (And if your class uses pseudonyms they don't even have to know it was you!) But ultimately, for this experiment to be a success, students have to buy into the whole process, taking ownership of their learning by taking responsibility for that of the people around them.

A Far-Reaching Continent

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* our hero emerges on a glorious Saturday morning, the kind that puts "a cheer in every face and a spring in every step" (18). But the sunshine hardly touches Tom, cruelly tasked to whitewash Aunt Polly's fence:

> Tom . . . surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged (16).

I have never related to a character in literature so well as when I face my "far-reaching continent" of ungraded student work every weekend. But this story has a happy ending, as Tom tricks the other boys into taking over his chores. "Like it? Well, I don't see why I oughtn't to like it," Tom cons his friend. "Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?"(21). Given the chance to participate in the mountainous enterprise of responding to informal writing on a daily basis, students will eagerly pick up the paintbrush. And although whitewashing may be a dubious privilege, the use of social networking in homework is no hoax: students enjoy the chance to develop critical skills and knowledge in collaboration with their peers, while their instructors reap the side benefit of being able to use their finite teaching time more effectively.

Tom earns an apple, a kite, a dead rat on a string, and other untold riches for the opportunity to share his work. I'll settle for less: a little more spring in my step on Saturday morning, with the knowledge that my students are not speaking into a vacuum, but learning from each other as members of a community and becoming mature citizens of the digital age.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — Traci Gardner, RWT

Follow Kitsis's lead and set up a wiki-based project for your students. "A Collaboration of Sites and Sounds: Using Wikis to Catalog Protest Songs" begins with discussion and analysis of hip-hop artist Kanye West's single "Diamonds from Sierra Leone." Based on this model, students then research and analyze contemporary and historic protest songs and as a class catalog their findings in a wiki. Whether completed in class or as homework, the activity provides fertile opportunities for inviting the best of social networking into the curriculum. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=979

Dani Weber and Mike Smithmier

Death of the 3" × 5" Note Cards

In a "conversational essay," high school student Dani Weber shows her English teacher that electronic approaches are better than some old methods for organizing research papers.

From brainstorming to outlining, rough drafts to peer editing, revision to final copy, all of the tasks involved in the writing process can be accomplished using technology. However, when faced with the research paper, students are often asked to keep track of sources and information on handwritten bibliography note cards. In this article, a student (Dani) and her instructor (Mike) take turns telling the story of how the student taught the instructor that even note cards can be generated and managed electronically. Moreover, Dani's knowledge of Excel shortened the homework process and prevented her from having to take notebooks and textbooks home: assignments could be emailed and submitted electronically; discussions could take place on forum boards, and documents could be transported on jump drives between home and school.

Dani: When senior year approached, the thing I had been most worried about was my research paper. As second semester came along, the research paper deadlines were given to us.

Mike: Well, second semester arrived and once again I started teaching the research process. I took out my lecture notes, my binder with assorted handouts and news articles about plagiarism, and my copy of Sharon Sorenson's *The Research Paper: A Contemporary Approach.* You know the drill: have at least 75 3" × 5" note cards, with 15–20 sources, and 50 or more pieces of information to analyze and synthesize into a 10-page research paper. Here are the deadlines. I told the students, "If you're not ahead, you're behind, and if you make the deadline, you're falling behind—so stay ahead! Now think about a topic that you are interested in for next week and do some preliminary reading for a working outline."

Dani: That was the day I went home and looked up some ideas for what my paper would be about. I knew a lot about the predictions of 2012 made by Nostradamus, and because it was interesting, I knew that would be my topic. I got onto the Internet and ordered some books from the Mid-Continent Public Library. As soon as they arrived, I started my bibliography.

Mike: I took the seniors to the library to start gathering their sources and putting them on cards with my admonishment to pay attention to formatting "in strict adherence to MLA style. "Off in the corner, I noticed Dani doing something on the computer. And she did not have any cards in front of her! "What are you doing?" I demanded. "Where are your note cards? Why aren't you writing anything down?" I was really aggravated with her by this time.

Dani: I had heard about this website that actually did all the work for you: http://www.EasyBib.com. I had my bibliography done a week ahead of time but I still felt like I was behind. I kept hearing Mr. Smithmier's words, "If you make the deadline, you're falling behind."

Mike: She showed me EasyBib. She was copying and pasting source information from the online card catalog and the information from Ebscohost, an online research database, into their template. It was then transformed into her selected MLA sixth-edition format. She could then convert that document into a Works Cited or Works Consulted page in Microsoft Word. A few fixes in formatting and "voila" she was all done.[1] I asked her, "Why *not*